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Learning the Collection: a New Librarian's Experience in Collection Management

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Learning the Collection: a New Librarian's Experience in Collection Management

Abstract

I am a reference and instruction librarian at Iowa State University with collection development and liaison responsibilities for chemistry, biochemistry, entomology, and natural resource ecology. I recently came to librarianship with an education and three years' experience in biochemistry and biotechnology. During the last four years I have learned that my time in library school did not teach me all that I needed to know to be a successful librarian. The administration at my library has realized that it takes time to acclimate to a new position. It provides training to speed up this transitional period for all incoming librarians and make sure everyone is up to speed in the core competencies of their jobs. Librarians at ISU have written about developing these competencies (Stacy-Bates et al. 2003). There are many great articles that discuss collection projects completed by new librarians and the difficulties faced (Tucker 2004; Kennedy 2008). This is my perspective on this arduous but rewarding process.

Disciplines

Library and Information Science

Comments

Published in *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship* 63 (Fall 2010) by the Association of College and Research Libraries.

Viewpoints

Learning the Collection: a New Librarian's Experience in Collection Management

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I am a reference and instruction librarian at Iowa State University with collection development and liaison responsibilities for chemistry, biochemistry, entomology, and natural resource ecology. I recently came to librarianship with an education and three years' experience in biochemistry and biotechnology. During the last four years I have learned that my time in library school did not teach me all that I needed to know to be a successful librarian. The administration at my library has realized that it takes time to acclimate to a new position. It provides training to speed up this transitional period for all incoming librarians and make sure everyone is up to speed in the core competencies of their jobs. Librarians at ISU have written about developing these competencies ([Stacy-Bates et al. 2003](#)). There are many great articles that discuss collection projects completed by new librarians and the difficulties faced ([Tucker 2004](#); [Kennedy 2008](#)). This is my perspective on this arduous but rewarding process.

I thought that I was adjusting well to my new job. At the Help and Information desk I can usually direct patrons to resources even in subject matters where I have no in-depth knowledge. I have become accustomed to the time-intensive aspects of teaching. However, collection development was more difficult in the beginning, as there are many aspects to consider when picking the best materials. As difficult as the acquisition portion of collection development is, I did not truly understand the complexity of collection development until I started a collection management project.

One of my position's responsibilities was to maintain the collection at the Physical Science Reading Room: 27,000 volumes housed in a building connecting the chemistry and physics buildings. A 30-year staff member managed the reading room and made all the day-to-day decisions. My role, until the start of this project, was limited to ordering new and

updated reference materials. The collection had been built, with faculty input, to support the needs of the faculty and students who worked and studied in the adjacent buildings. It had been well managed by previous librarians.

Nevertheless, the reading room's future was in doubt. The space occupied by this collection is located directly in the path of a proposed road/walkway into campus, and there were questions about how much space for print materials the chemistry department would make available when the reading room relocated. With imminent changes anticipated, I began to evaluate the collection.

The first task was to analyze an inventory of the collection with circulation rates. Data about the extent of electronic coverage and duplication within the collection was also gathered and added to the spreadsheet.

Next I spent several days measuring the collection. I did this myself because I wanted the measurements done quickly and the job provided an opportunity to get to know the depth and extent of the collection. Also, I intended to use the measurement to aid in selecting titles once it was determined how much space the new reading room would have for print materials.

I spent time talking with the staff of the reading room to determine which of the books and materials were used and which never seemed to move at all. The latter materials were removed from the collection immediately, such as the decennial indexes for *Chemical Abstracts*. Other materials that were underutilized but historically important, such as the *Gmelin Handbook*, were moved to the storage facility. These discussions helped me identify the category of materials that don't circulate much but are still consulted. These are the most difficult to identify from raw circulation data but some of the most important to have accessible.

The project began in July and the data collection phase was completed by the middle of August, but there still had been no decisions made concerning the future of the reading room and the space available for print materials. With the downturn in the economy and the greater than expected university budget cuts, we learned during the Fall of 2009 that the main area of the reading room was being considered for office space for the chemistry department. In October, negotiations led to the library's partial retention of the space. The reading room had consisted of one large open area and an adjacent area with two small floors of stacks for journal storage. The library would retain the use of the small floors for storage until space could be made available in other locations. The large main room would be repurposed into office space at the end of the semester. As the retained space would be virtually inaccessible, this meant that the library would need to relocate and merge these materials into the collections at the main library.

During the move I was consulted if there were questions about placement and found that it is much easier to make a good decision quickly if you are already aware of the composition of the collection. The reading room collection was comprised of the core materials that previous librarians and faculty had selected for easy accessibility, and I wanted to determine what their priorities had been. The highest concentration of materials

and usage were those that focused on protocols. As a result, it is now a priority to acquire resources that focus on procedures in electronic format, as it provides access in the patrons' own workspaces.

Being a new librarian gave me both advantages and disadvantages. While I was inexperienced, I came in with no preconceived ideas about which titles should be circulating. I could look at this collection with fresh eyes and see what was happening versus what was expected. In the future I will have to remember that although much of my knowledge is accurate, the resources that people rely on change along with their discipline. Even though I had to spend more time with the collection and the data to make the initial decisions, the time spent in the stacks gave me greater insight into the nature of the collection. My inexperience also left me without historical precedent, so it was vital to rely on the staff of the reading room and my fellow librarians for advice.

I was pleased to be able to undertake a project this early in my career that allowed me to truly dive into the stacks and learn so much about the collection and the needs of the patrons. The information from this project will shape my selection of materials and my collecting policy. Locknar and Vine wrote that collection responsibilities are difficult because "recent graduates do not have the necessary skills simply due to lack of applied experience and education" ([2001](#)). My graduate classes taught me the basics and gave me a foundation on which to build skills, but the intricacies of this job are difficult to teach because every library is different. While reading articles, taking classes and training are all vital to understanding these processes, a librarian does not truly understand the complexities of collection development and management until one has survived that first major project.

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